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ABSTRACT

This research brief highlights student employment trends and their implications for higher education, and identifies major sources of national data on the subject. Text and tables provide data on: (1) number and percentage of college students employed, by age range, for 1988; (2) changes in the number and percent of employed college students, from 1972 to 1988; (3) percent of students in the work force by family income, by type of institution, and by race/ethnicity; (4) hours worked per week; (5) kinds of jobs held by college students; and (6) average earnings. Data highlights include: the percentage of employed full-time students aged 16 to 24 has risen from 35 percent in 1972 to 46.5 percent in 1988; 62 percent of students of all ages are working; and full-time students who are employed are working an average of 20 hours a week. Implications of student employment are noted, including the growth of part-time study, the growth in duration of study, and lower levels of participation in college activities. Descriptions of three data resources and a bibliography of nine items are provided. (JDD)

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STUDENTS WHO WORK: A PROFILE

Holly Hexter

Today, a significant majority of college students combine academics with paid employment that takes the form of a sponsored work-study job or a job secured on their own. Although the working student isn't a new phenomenon, the proportion of students who work has increased. This is in part accounted for by the fact that the composition of the student body and the mix of the financial aid that students receive has changed. Colleges now admit more students over age 35 and more part-time students who already are self-supporting.

This Research Brief highlights student employment trends and their implications for higher education, and identifies the major sources of national data on the subject.

HIGHLIGHTS

- More traditional college students—full-time students aged 16 to 24—are working today than 15 or 20 years ago. The proportion has risen significantly from 35 percent in 1972 to 46.5 percent in 1988.[1]
- Sixty-two percent of students **of all ages** are working.
- Full-time students who are employed are working on average 20 hours a week. Almost one out of five is working 30 hours or more, and one out of 10 is working 35 hours or more, the equivalent of a full-time job.
- Traditional college-age students tend to be clustered in food service, sales and clerical jobs rather than technical or professional positions.

IMPLICATIONS

- Is work another form of shifting college costs onto students? More students are self-supporting today. Loans now make up a larger part of the student financial aid package, and many students will graduate with sizable debts.
- Is student employment attenuating the college career? National studies show it is taking students longer to complete baccalaureate programs. The number of students enrolled part-time has grown significantly in recent years.
- What effect does student employment have on participation in campus life? Commitment to paid work means students may be less available for campus activities or for community service. Proposals for national service should take into account the pervasiveness of work among full-time as well as part-time students.

Table 1
Students At Work, 1988

	Total enrolled	Total employed	%
Students 16-24	7,973,000	4,279,000	54
Students 25 and older	5,316,000	3,905,000	74
Total	13,289,000	8,184,000	62

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1989, and unpublished data.

HOW MANY STUDENTS ARE WORKING?

- The majority of college students today are combining employment with coursework. Of the 13.3 million students enrolled in colleges and universities in 1988, 62 percent were working (table 1).
- The proportion of 16- to 24-year-old college students who work has grown steadily since the early 1970s, when slightly more than 40 percent of students were employed. In 1988, of the 7.9 million college students aged 16 to 24, 54 percent were employed.
- Of the 5.3 million college students aged 25 and older, about 74 percent were employed in 1988.
- The growth in student employment has outpaced the growth in the traditional college population. Between 1972 and 1988, the number of students employed rose 56 percent, while the total number of students enrolled grew 22 percent (table 2).
- The upward trend in the number of working students is likely to continue, since a higher percentage of incoming students is employed today. More than 47 percent of college freshmen were in the work force in fall 1988, compared with 43 percent 10 years earlier.
- In 1988, 6.7 percent of college students aged 16 to 24 in the labor force were unemployed—actively seeking but unable to find jobs. That rate is the lowest in recent years; since 1979, rates have fluctuated between 7 percent and 12 percent.

WHO'S WORKING?

- The increase in student employment is most striking with regard to female students: The proportion working rose from 39 percent in 1972 to 56 percent in 1988. That compares to an increase from 44 percent to 51 percent of male students during that time.

Table 2
College Students* Employed In The Civilian Labor Force, October 1972 - October 1988 (in thousands)

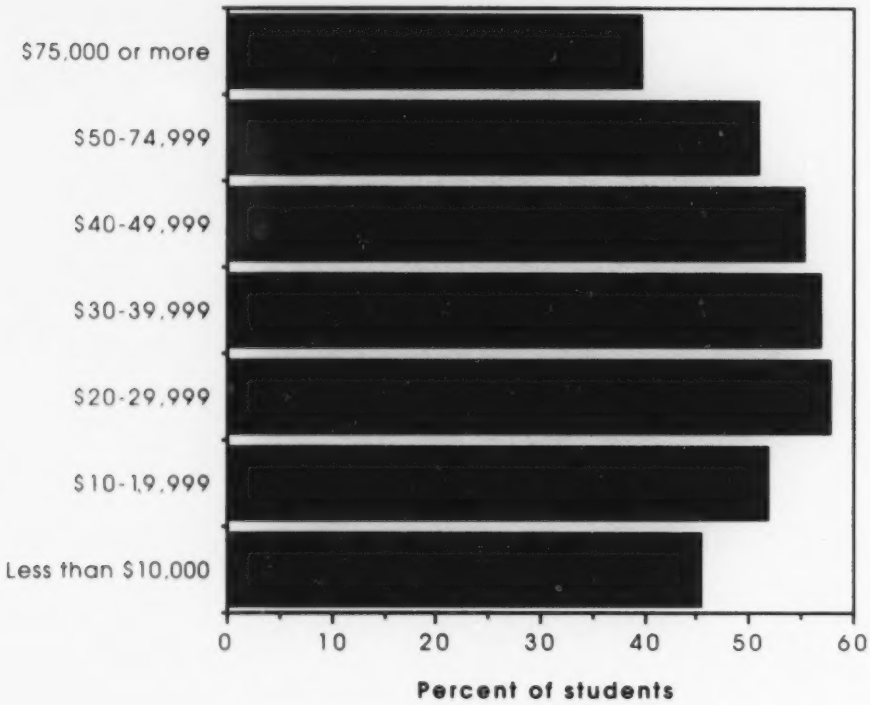
Year	Total Students	Number Employed	Percent Employed
1972	6,548	2,735	41.8
1973	6,344	2,753	43.4
1974	6,619	2,944	44.5
1975	7,221	3,074	42.6
1976	7,456	3,364	45.1
1977	7,406	3,442	46.5
1978	7,267	3,467	47.7
1979	7,291	3,369	46.2
1980	7,470	3,547	47.5
1981	7,801	3,669	47.0
1982	7,924	3,730	47.1
1983	7,730	3,650	47.2
1984	7,839	3,836	48.9
1985	7,783	3,950	50.8
1986	7,603	3,825	50.3
1987	7,931	4,109	51.8
1988	7,973	4,279	53.7

*Includes students aged 16- to 24-years old.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Annual School Enrollment Status and Labor Force Participation of High School Graduates and Dropouts, various years.

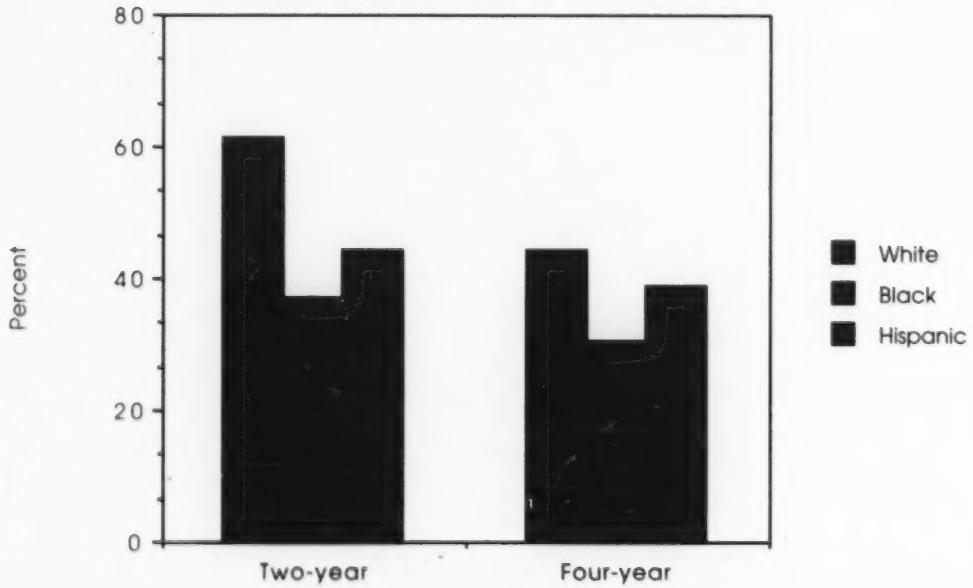
- Of today's students aged 16 to 24, 56 percent of whites, 52 percent of Hispanics, and 38 percent of blacks are employed.
- Of students aged 25 and older, 79 percent of male students and 70 percent of female students are employed. Among these older students, roughly 75 percent of whites, 70 percent of blacks, and 69 percent of Hispanics are working while taking college courses.
- Among students 16 to 24, middle-income students—students from families with incomes of between $20,000 and $39,000—are more likely to be in the labor force than students from either lower-income or upper-income families (figure 1).
- Sixty-eight percent of students aged 16 to 24 at two-year institutions are employed, compared with 48 percent of students at four-year institutions.

Figure 1
Percent of Students in the Work Force, by Family Income, 1987



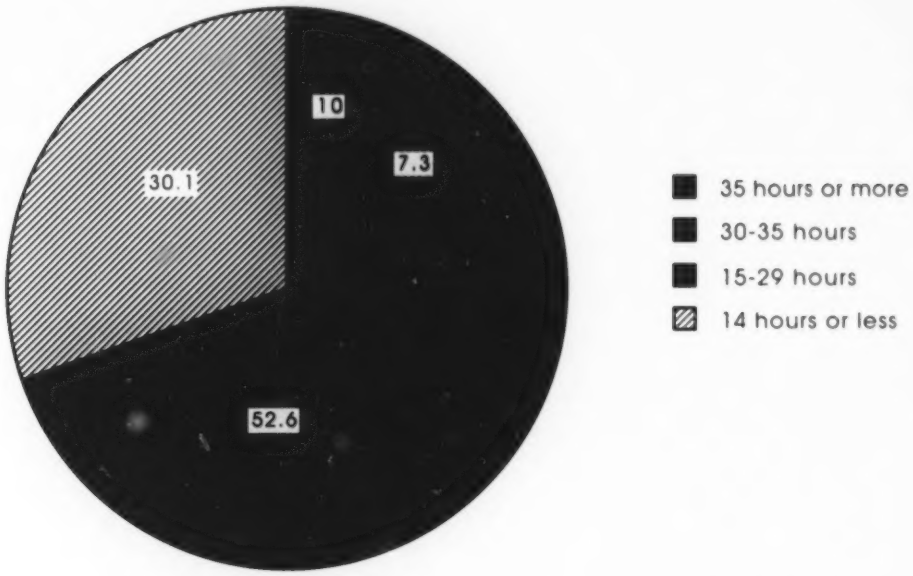
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, unpublished data

Figure 2
Full-Time Students Working, By Type of Institution and By Race/Ethnicity, 1988



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, unpublished data

Figure 3
Hours Worked Per Week By Full-Time Students Aged 16 to 24, 1988



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, unpublished data

Full-Time Students Aged 16 to 24

- In 1988, 46.5 percent of these full-time students aged 16 to 24 were working. This shows a steady increase from 35 percent of full-time students in 1972 and 39 percent in 1981.
- Of these full-time students, whites were more likely to be working (48 percent) than either Hispanics (41 percent) or blacks (32 percent). These patterns were consistent across types of institutions (see Figure 2).
- There is virtually no difference between men and women in the proportion of full-time students working (about 45 percent for each).

Part-Time Students Aged 16 to 24

- In 1988, 88 percent of students enrolled part-time were employed.
- Of those students, whites and Hispanics were more likely to be working than blacks (90 percent and 84 percent, respectively, versus 78 percent). These patterns prevailed in both two-year and four-year institutions.
- As with full-time students, a roughly equal proportion of women and men were working (89 percent and 87 percent).

HOW MUCH ARE STUDENTS WORKING?

Full-Time Students Aged 16 to 24

- On average, full-time students were working about 20 hours a week in 1988. This has not changed in recent years: between 1979 and 1986, the proportion of full-time students working more than 20 hours per week remained a little less than one third.
- In 1988, slightly more than half of the employed full-time students were working between 15 and 29 hours. Of the remaining students, more than one-quarter worked fewer than 15 hours; and 10 percent were working at least 35 hours, the Labor Department's definition of full-time work (figure 3).
- While older students work more hours than younger students, there doesn't seem to be a difference in terms of gender: men and women work roughly the same average number of hours. Nor are there appreciable differences in time worked by race or ethnicity, although previous studies have shown that black students worked more hours than did white students (table 3).

Table 3
Average Hours Worked Per Week by Students Aged 16-24, 1988

Enrolled:	Full-Time	Part-Time
Men	20.5	36.2
Women	18.9	34.9
Whites	19.6	35.8
Blacks	20.7	34.5
Hispanics	23.2	33.9
All students	19.6	35.5

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1989

Part-Time Students Aged 16 to 24

- Sixty-three percent of employed students who study part-time have the equivalent of a full-time job: 35 hours or more per week. The average amount of time part-time students devote to their jobs has remained constant in recent years.

Students 25 and Older

- Older students are much more likely to be holding a full-time job while attending school than younger students. On average, students aged 25 and older were working about 37 hours.
- While one-fourth of these students (23 percent) worked fewer than 30 hours, more than two-thirds worked 35 hours or more.

WHAT KINDS OF JOBS DO STUDENTS HOLD?

- Traditional college-age students tend to be clustered in food service, sales and clerical jobs. However, the kind of jobs students hold changes over their college careers. More fourth-year students than freshmen, for instance, have technical or professional jobs.[2]
- This trend prevails for older students as well. Of students aged 25 and older, almost 50 percent are in managerial and professional positions; about 33 percent are in technical, sales, or administrative support posts, while only 10 percent are in service jobs.

HOW MUCH ARE STUDENTS EARNING?

- In 1985, all students working full-time had median annual earnings of $7,228, compared with $2,208 for students working part-time.[3]
- Although male and female students appear to earn roughly the same amount, white and Asian students report earning more than black, Hispanic and American Indian students.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Over the last 15 to 20 years, student employment has shown a real increase; it is not simply an artifact of the growth in the student population. Most students are working at least part-time. Further, of working students enrolled full-time, one out of 10 is holding down a full-time job as well. This trend reflects

- changes in the college-going population;
- changing expectations about who pays for college; and
- rising college costs.

More college students today are self-supporting, having declared themselves independent of family resources. And if the trend of the 1980s persists, available student aid will continue to lag behind college costs.

Student employment is also linked to two interrelated issues: the duration of study and the growth of part-time study. The fact that students are taking longer to complete a degree can be attributed at least in part to the rise in student employment. It is hard to separate the findings on persistence from data on the part-time student population, which swelled from one-third of total enrollment in 1972 to more than two-fifths in 1987. By 1997, part-time students could account for as much as 45 percent of total enrollment.

The most obvious effect of student work is absence —from academic or extracurricular pursuits. Employment exerts a prominent—in some cases preeminent—claim on students' time. In examining issues of campus life, administrators must consider student employment a major factor in the low levels of participation in college activities. Similarly, efforts to encourage community service may have to be rethought in light of the considerable time already committed to paid work.

Educators and policymakers debating various proposals for mandatory national service for college-age youth must take into account the pervasiveness of student work—not only among part-time but full-time students as well.

Given the significance of this topic, it is unfortunate that the data used to characterize student employment fall short of answering many questions posed by college administrators and policymakers. For example, we are unable to distinguish oncampus from offcampus employment; identify the proportion of students compensated with federal or state Work-Study funds; or determine exactly how student earnings are being spent. Such data are urgently needed so that the relationship between student work and academic life can be better understood.

RESOURCES

1. Detailed information on the labor force participation of students is obtained from a special survey conducted each October by the Census Bureau and reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The data series is titled "School Enrollment and Study". Unless otherwise noted, the data in this research brief are taken from this BLS Series. For more information, contact Sharon Cohany or Jim Markey at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, GAO Building, 441 G St. N.W., Room 2486, Washington, D.C., (202)523-1944.

2. Comparisons of two high school classes can be obtained from two longitudinal studies of the U.S. Department of Education—the National Longitudinal Study of the class of 1972 and the High School and Beyond study of 1980 high school seniors. Student employment data from High School and Beyond are reported in *College Students Who Work: 1980-1984 Analysis Findings from High School and Beyond*, by C. Dennis Carroll and Teresita L. Chan-Kopka, published by the National Center for Education Statistics, 1988. For more information, contact C. Dennis Carroll, NCES, 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C., (202)357-6774.

3. Data on student earnings is obtained from 1983 and 1985 surveys by the Simmons Market Research Bureau, Inc., published as *National College Study*, (New York City). For more information, contact Simmons Market Research Bureau, Inc., 380 Madison Ave., Fifth Floor, New York, N.Y. 10017, (212)916-8900.

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